

CONSERVATION ADVISORY COUNCILS AND BOARDS



Hudson River
Estuary Program

Building Capacity for Local Conservation in New York

What is a Conservation Advisory Council (CAC)?

In municipalities throughout New York, **Conservation Advisory Councils (CACs)** and **Conservation Boards (CBs)** advise local governing boards, planning boards, and zoning boards of appeals on matters related to the environment. By providing a scientific perspective on land-use planning and decision-making in their communities, CACs and CBs contribute to the conservation and improvement of the local environment and quality of life for residents.

In their municipal roles, CACs and CBs develop town-wide inventories of natural resources and open space, conduct research, review development proposals, conduct site visits, deliver education programs, implement stewardship projects, and gather and distribute information to other town agencies, land-use applicants, and the general public.

How do CACs or CBs benefit local governments?

CACs and CBs provide a formal structure within local governments for natural resource-based planning and advising on environmental matters.

Because the CAC or CB can do some of the “legwork” associated with planning and environmental reviews, it can extend the work of a time-strapped planning board. The CAC can help to provide more thorough information about natural resources at a site and a more detailed analysis of planning issues and environmental impacts, resulting in a more comprehensive base of information for the land-use decision-making carried out by the planning board and by other local agencies. CACs can also help to raise environmental awareness, educate the public, and coordinate municipal officials, government agencies, and outside groups engaged in local or inter-municipal environmental planning or stewardship efforts.



Photo: Laura Heady

RESOURCES FOR CACs and CBs:

- New York State Association of Conservation Commissions
www.nysaccny.org
- *A Guide to the Organization of Local Environmental Advisory Councils*
<http://planning.westchestergov.com/images/stories/reports/CACguide97.pdf>
- Conservation and Land Use 101 webinar training series
www.dec.ny.gov/lands/5094.html#Training
- *Conserving Natural Areas and Wildlife in Your Community*
www.dec.ny.gov/lands/50083.html
- *Creating a Natural Resources Inventory*
www.dec.ny.gov/lands/100925.html
- *New York State Local Open Space Planning Guide*
http://www.dos.ny.gov/lg/publications/Local_Open_Space_Planning_Guide.pdf

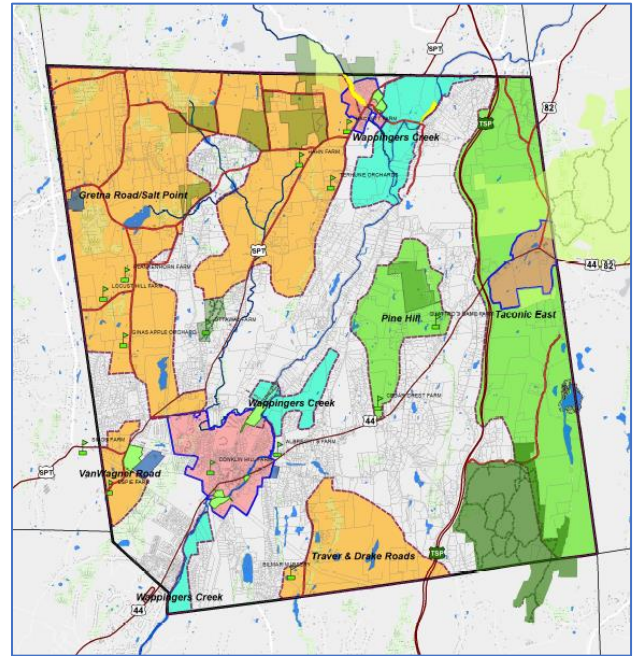
How is a CAC or CB established?

CACs and CBs are established by a municipality under Article 12-F Section 239-x of NYS General Municipal Law and are sometimes called environmental commissions. A CAC may be established by ordinance or by local law and is composed of 3-9 residents appointed by the local governing board. Members should have a strong interest in the mission of the council, the time and willingness to work on CAC tasks, and willingness and ability to work cooperatively with other municipal agencies. It is helpful to have some members with knowledge and experience in the environmental sciences, planning, engineering, and law; however, there are no minimum professional qualifications. CAC members with an eagerness to learn are equally valuable and can attend trainings and educational opportunities to build their knowledge and skills.

Open Space Definition

“Any area characterized by natural scenic beauty or, whose existing openness, natural condition or present state of use, if preserved, would enhance the present or potential value of abutting or surrounding development or would establish a desirable pattern of development or would offer substantial conformance with the planning objectives of the municipality or would maintain or enhance the conservation of natural or scenic resources.”

- NYS General Municipal Law Article 12-F Section 239-x



Priority Open Space Areas, Town of Pleasant Valley Open Space and Farmland Plan (2013)

Natural Resource and Open Space Inventories

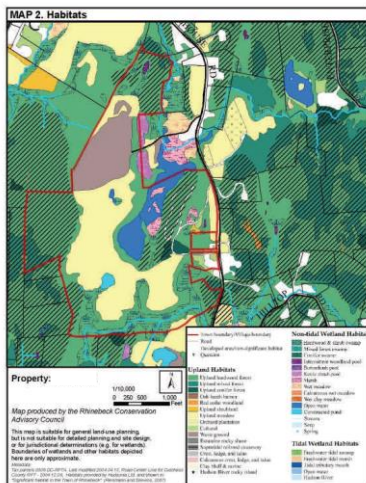
State enabling legislation directs CACs to complete an **open space inventory (OSI)** prioritizing open areas in a municipality for conservation based on natural, scenic, and cultural values. A **natural resources inventory** is the implicit foundation for an OSI and serves to identify and describe naturally occurring resources. On the basis of this information, an OSI lists important lands in the community according to priority for conservation or acquisition and displays them on an open space map. An OSI is often developed within a broader **open space plan**, which outlines strategies for the use and conservation of priority lands, and serves to complement and inform the local comprehensive plan.

DEVELOPING A STRONG ADVISORY ROLE:

- Establish good working relationships with other local agency members by regularly attending their meetings.
- Take a collaborative, constructive approach.
- Maintain a scientific, objective perspective.
- Build expertise by attending educational trainings.
- Engage from the start of a project.
- Provide reviews and recommendations in a timely fashion.
- Ask questions!

Conservation Board Status

When a local legislature adopts the open space inventory and map prepared by the CAC, the inventory becomes the official **open space index** for the municipality. The legislature may then pass a resolution to designate the CAC as a conservation board (CB). A CB remains advisory; however, it acquires a formal role in the environmental review process for any proposed actions on properties listed in the open space index. In some municipalities, CBs are asked to comment on all projects—not just those included in the index. In others, CACs are asked to provide reviews without having acquired board status.



Natural resource maps compiled by the Rhinebeck CAB are used to inform environmental review.

CASE STUDY: Town of Rhinebeck Conservation Advisory Board (CAB)

In the Town of Rhinebeck in Dutchess County, **the CAB provides natural resource information to the planning board** for all new development proposals. The CAB maintains a database of publicly available information about soil, slopes, habitats, floodplains, wetlands, etc. When a new proposal is referred to the CAB, the members use computer mapping software to prepare site-specific maps and identify sensitive natural resources for the planning board. The Rhinebeck CAB also maintains a database of **habitat-based conservation recommendations** from scientific reports and literature. For each development project before the planning board, the CAB assembles a set of development guidelines based on the types and configuration of habitats shown on the natural resource maps they’ve created. The maps and recommendations provide objective, science-based information to the land use review process. In one instance, the CAB maps alerted the planning board of an area protected by the town’s wetland watershed zoning provisions and changes were made to the project design. The planning board now relies on the CAB’s analysis and provides a **site resource analysis assessment checklist** to applicants to streamline the review process and get everyone on the same page.